

Deirdre Raftery and Elizabeth M.Smyth

Education, Identity and Women Religious, 1800-1950

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Education, Identity and Women Religious, 1800-1950, edited by Deirdre Raftery and Elizabeth Smyth provides a stimulating addition to the history of women religious, gender, religion, and social and cultural change. It explores the work of women religious in missions and in founding schools, colleges and teaching hospitals and in the wider constituencies that they served. The opening chapter rehearses feminist theological narratives of religion and provides a broad overview that highlights themes that recur in both the editors' introduction and the ten empirical chapters that follow. These drill down into archival holdings of congregations to look at how communities of women operated as transnational religious institutes and engaged in teaching and nursing in various locations in Africa, Australia, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, South East Asia and the USA. Chapters look at the distinct stages in the lives of women religious, how sisters were formed, what their vows meant in different contexts, how the concept of vocation was communicated in schools and broader communities and how women religious responded to changing contexts in which they found themselves.

The collection combines bibliographical data and contextual information for scholars new to the field, with in-depth primary research for those already versed in histories of women religious. Authors introduce readers to forms of archival data collected and preserved by women religious in a range of private and public archives, while some chapters delve into material culture or develop oral

histories of communities. Particularly informative is Raftery's commentary on researchers' use of This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by the Canadian History of Education Association in Historical Studies in Education, available online at http://historicalstudiesineducation.ca/index.php/edu_hse-rhe/article/view/4529/4769. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2017, Canadian History of Education Association.

convent annals and on how the inclusion of regular self examination within the reflective nature of religious life situates women religious as articulate oral history respondents with high levels of awareness of their own shortcomings (and of the education they offered), but whose accounts nonetheless reflect the particular culture of their communities.

Gender, feminism and transnationalism are among the theoretical optics used to frame analyses which variously balance accounts on the continua of celebration-critique and of theory-empiricism. Noteworthy is Smyth's challenge to Jürgen Osterhammel's statement that while "religion can be seen as a key worldwide communication network during the nineteenth century" (45) it would be "banal" to describe such a network as transnational. In contesting Osterhammel's view, Smyth builds on Patricia Clavin's view of transnationalism as concerned with people, social spaces they inhabit, networks they form and ideas they exchange,¹ a framework that is particularly useful when retrieving histories of women. Smyth argues that the women religious she studies were members of congregations with international presences and that women religious' vows, congregational cultures and constitutions nested them within transnational organisations. Other chapters look at questions of ethnocultural diversity running in tandem with the transnational movement of women religious, which provided new challenges to religious communities and their traditions. The collection also includes instances where authors "trouble" the transnational, as in Rosa Bruno-Jofré's inclusion of the violence of colonial 'civilizing' understandings in her analysis of the movement of a religious order from France to Canada. She traces how the illocutionary force (or intentionality) of the salvation of the soul that sustained the sisters' work, along with the keeping or re-creating of a Catholic order within the configuration of church doctrines and authority, played out in three different settings to generate unexpected meanings and cultural and political practices: the building of a French Canadian identity in the village of Grande Clairière; the silencing of the soul in the Marieval Indian Residential School for Aboriginal children; and the quest for social recognition in the mission in Brandon, Manitoba.

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As with innovative scholarship, the collection prompts further questions, including around the entanglement of gender and religion in writing the history of women religious more fully into the narratives of women's history, educational history, and history in general. A number of chapters hint towards the history of the senses by indicating the importance of music and the regularities of singing, of contemplation, and of prayer (silent and shared) that shaped both a religious life and a religious self that was auditory, and formed through sounds and silences in the resonances and materials/materiality of bodies and buildings. Attention to hearing and listening, to the sounds of singing and the 'silences' of contemplation, point forward to research on the sonorous and the affective in the formation of both the religious self and the pupil self.² The sensory has the potential to move histories of women religious beyond how funds from music teaching supported the establishment of poor-schools and beyond attention to an 'accomplishments' curriculum for girls. Discussion of women religious' engagement with national systems of education also prefigures how histories of women religious might be integrated into a more expansive history of education that looks at similarities and differences in the education of and by women religious in locations where their schools operated alongside those of other denominations, as was the case, for example in Mauritius, Malacca and Malta in the early nineteenth century.³

At the point when the number of women entering religious life continues to diminish, the editors and authors are to be congratulated on an important addition to the growing research on women religious' historical experience. As Raftery and Smyth note, the book "represents the energies of scholars who recognise that there is much more work to be done" (p.5).

Endnotes

1. Patricia Clavin, "Defining Transnationalism," in *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 4 (2005): 421-39

2. For auditory histories of education see Joyce Goodman, "Experimenting with Sound and Silence: Sonorous Bodies, Sonic Selves, Acoustic Topographies and Auditory Histories of Schooling," in *Paedagogica Historica* (2017), forthcoming
3. For Mauritius, Malaga and Malta see See Joyce Goodman, "'Disposed to Take the Charge': British Women and the Management of Female Education, 1800-37," in *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 11, no. 1 (1999): 59-74